

A  
S E R M O N

Preached before the

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King & Queen

A T

W H I T E - H A L L,

*December 13th. 1691.*

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By *Edward Pelling*, D. D. Chaplain in Ordinary to Their Majesties.

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L O N D O N,

Printed for *John Everingham* at the Star near the  
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SERMON

Preached before the

King & Queen

AT

WHITE-HALL

December 18th. 1691.

By Edward Pelling, D.D. Chaplain in Ordinary to Their Majesties.

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**SERMON**  
 Preached before the  
**KING and QUEEN.**

Acts XXIV. 16.

*And herein do I Exercise my self, to have always  
 a Conscience void of offence toward God and  
 toward Man.*

**T**HES E were the words of the Great  
 Apostle St. Paul, when he was Arraign-  
 ed at Caesarea ; when Ananias and the Elders  
 were Parties to accuse him ; when the Elo-  
 quent Tertullus was Counsel to prosecute  
 him ; when Felix was the Judge, and many  
 desperate Witnesses were ready to depose the  
 falsest things against him ; in Circumstan-  
 ces

ces so dangerous, that no way seem'd open  
for Innocence to escape; this was the Apostles  
Defence and Comfort, the Testimony of a  
good Conscience. *This (said he) I confess,*  
*that after the way which the Jews call Heresy,*  
*so worship I the God of my Fathers, believing all*  
*things which are written in the Law and the*  
*Prophets; and have Hope towards God, which*  
*they themselves also allow, that there shall be a*  
*Resurrection of the Dead: And herein do I exer-*  
*cise myself, to have always a Conscience void of*  
*offence toward God and toward Man.*

That we may rightly understand this mat-  
ter, we must consider a little, what it is to  
have a Conscience void of offence, which was  
the ground of the Apostle's Plea.

Conscience in general, signifies a Man's  
Judgment or Opinion, and relation of Action.  
That Noble Faculty of the Soul; the Under-  
standing, when it looks and enquires into  
things, whether they be Good or Evil, is first  
called the Speculative Judgment. But when it  
is employed about something that is to be  
done, and examines whether it is by Good or  
Evil,



~~But~~ it is call'd by Moralists, the *Practick*  
*Judgment*; and by Divines *Conscience*. And  
 the Office of Conscience is two-fold; to di-  
 rect one in acting, and then to pass a Censure  
 upon his Actions: Before the thing is done,  
 Conscience serves as a Tutor to advise and  
 teach; and after the Fact is over, it serves as  
 a Judge, either to acquit, or to condemn him  
 for it.

So that to have a *Conscience void of Offence*,  
 is in the Apostle's sense, to be powerfully go-  
 vern'd by one's Conscience in the faithful dis-  
 charge of his Duty; and so to follow the  
 Light which is in his Understanding, as not  
 to fall into any known Sin, nor to act any  
 thing which will gall and wound his Mind in  
 the consequence. When a Man is conscious  
 to himself, that according to the best of his  
 Endeavours, he has been careful to express  
 his Duty to God and Man; when his Con-  
 science governs him rightly, and makes him  
 cheerful; when it gives him true Advice, and  
 spiritual Comfort; when it is Honest in it's  
 Directions, and Delightful in it's Rewards;

then

then he may be rightly said to have a *Conscience void of Offence.*

This the Apostle protested now in open Court, was his constant Exercise: But this must be understood chiefly of the time after his Conversion, to Christianity. For while he was yet a *Jew* and a zealous *Pharisee*, his Conscience was not void of all Offence: We know what his Sins were, and with what Penitence and Freedom he lamented them afterwards. Yet this is to be said on his behalf, that for ought we find, he was a Man of sincere Intentions all along. Tho' he was zealous for the Law, and persecuted Christianity, and was guilty of the Blood of the Proto-martyr *St. Stephen*, yet in all this he followed his Judgment at that time. His great fault was not so much in his Will as in his Understanding: His Prejudices were strong and powerful; his Education carry'd a mighty hand over him, and the concurrent Zeal of the Priests and Elders did very much help to inflame him still; so that he thought in his Conscience he was bound to do many things contrary  
to

to the Name of *Jesus*, as he seriously and solemnly professed, *Act. 26. 9.* He was a sad Example of Humane Infirmary: And as we learn by it, to extend our Charity and Compassion to those whose Consciences are mis-lead after that manner; so He himself became a great Object of God's Compassion; his Errors serv'd to lessen his Guilt; and *he obtained Mercy, because he sinned ignorantly in Unbelief, 1 Tim. 1. 13.*

But when he came to be thoroughly enlightened by the Son of Righteousness, and his Conscience was set to rights, it was his stedfast Resolution and fixt Endeavour to keep it more in Charity than the Apple of his Eye: As a Man that has once broken his Bones by chance, is very careful lest he slip again; so was the Apostle after his Conversion, industriously bent upon keeping his Conscience from every the least Wound or Blow. He valued no Stripes, as long as they did not touch that tender Part. Defamations, Imprisonment, the grimest Dangers, the greatest Difficulties, Death it self with all its ghastly and frightful Retinue;

all was welcome to Him, as long as he could keep that Darling in his bosom, his Conscience, void of Offence toward God and toward Man.

And this shews us all what ought to be the great Care and Business of our whole Life; in every particular still to have a very tender Regard and Care of our Consciences; and whatever we neglect or forget amidst the Hurries of this troublesome World, never to let this great Care slip out of our Minds. For whether Conscience be well or ill kept, a Man shall be sure to hear of it at last; he will certainly find the Issues and Effects of it at home; let him take what course he pleases, his Conscience will bear him Company, and in the end prove his Comfort, or his Plague.

'Tis true, a Man's Conscience may not accuse him or fly upon him presently. How Evil soever it be, it may lye quiet for a time. Perhaps he may not for some considerable long space feel any throes, any  
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luctations, any rufflings within him, but his Land may seem to be at rest. Either he may not enquire at all into his State, or he may abuse and delude himself with a false account of his Condition, or he may harden his Mind with loose Atheistical Principles, or he may bear down his Conscience with a violent Hand, and so for a time it may be still and quiet, like a Clock that stands when the Weights are down; but one time or other the Hand of God will wind it up again, and then every Wheel and Movement will stir to purpose: The Eye will mourn, the Forehead will blush, the Heart will bleed and be very sore; and yet perhaps the sense of what he has done will not lead him to true Repentance, but throw him at last into the very Gulph of Desperation. And therefore we should never be so confident of our own Selves as to do an ill thing: We should not trust, no not our own Hearts; because in the end our worst Enemy will be that in our own Bosom.



But there are three Cases especially, wherein it highly concerns Men to have a *Conscience void of Offence*.

I. *First*, in case of Publick Dangers, when the Face of the World looks uncomfortable and dismal. Seldom do the things of this Life continue at a stay: The state and condition of the World ever and anon alters, either by means of the different Interests and Designs of Men, who labour still to turn the Wheel about, or by the just Judgment of God for Peoples Wantonness and Ingratitude in times of outward Prosperity. Now when Circumstances are full of Threats and Terror, they will soon shew what the inside of Men is: Conscience, which in such a Case is apt to tell Guilty Wretches their own, will possess them with fearful apprehensions that God is their Enemy, and that they have no just reason to hope for Protection from Heaven. And what does this naturally tend to, but to put them on the Rack, when their Fears and their Sins

Sins both haunt them ? Whereas an in-offensive Conscience gives a Man all the Peace and Security imaginable. For these are the sure Principles on which he builds his Satisfaction, that God presides over the World, superintending and governing all Affairs here below ; that not so much as a little Bird falls to the Ground without his Permission ; that the very Hairs of a good Man's head are all number'd ; that tho' here we meet with Tribulations, yet Christ hath overcome the World ; that he will not suffer us to be tempted above what we are able ; and that tho' Extremities should happen, yet if we suffer with Christ, we shall also reign with him together.

However some are so hardy, as to scoff at Religion, and strive to wear out of their Minds the sense of God, yet nothing can carry a Man out in the Day of Tryal, but such Principles as these. And whoever he be that Relyeth upon these Principles, and upon Examining his Actions, finds good Reasons to believe that his  
Heart

Heart is sincere and upright, he must needs be danger-proof in a very high degree. You have an instance here in St. Paul, tho' the Jews had bound themselves under a Curse that they would kill him; tho' Ananias used his Authority, and Tertullus his Eloquence against him; tho' Men and Devils conspir'd to destroy him, yet his Rejoycing was this, that his constant exercise was to have a Conscience void of Offence toward God, and toward Man.

'Tis true, such evil Days and times of Danger every one of us is very apt to put far off from himself, by reason of the uncertainty of them. For as they may, so perhaps they may not happen; and every one out of fondness to himself, is willing to hope they will not come, at least in his time. But then,

II. Secondly, there is another Case, which every day occurs, against which a Wise Man will be well provided, the Case of Sickness; when we should have little else to do, but to trim up our Lamps, and exercise

exercise our Graces, and so to repose our selves in the bosom of a faithful God and a merciful Redeemer. Now he that makes a Conscience of his ways, and studies to carry himself without offence toward God and Man, will at that time have nothing in comparison to do but to wait God's Pleasure: For as he foresees that such a day will come, so he prepares for it before-hand. He is wiser than to leave the Great and Heavy Work of eradicating sinful Habits, and of changing the whole Frame and Inclination of his Heart, to be done upon a sick Bed; but takes an early care to die to the World and to himself daily. Upon this account, tho' a Disease may be very troublesome and painful, and parting of those old acquaintances; the Soul and the Body, may be attended with violent Natural Struggings; yet his Spirit must needs be full of Peace; it being impossible that a Course of Vertue and Holiness should bring in any bitter remembrance at the last.

It was the Prayer of *Hezekiah*, when he was bid to set his House in order, *Isai. 38. Remember now, O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before Thee in Truth, and with a perfect Heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight.* What unconsionable Man is there in the World, that dares say to God in his Languishings? It cannot be, unless his Conscience be utterly seared, but his Heart must ake, and his Bowels must be full of Gall and Wormwood, and his Soul must be ruffled with many dismal apprehensions of a Judgment to come; because his Conscience, which will then awake, and will speak loud and home to him, must needs tell him, that if he dies, he is undone to all Eternity.

*Tertullian* has rightly observed, that God has tinctured all Wickedness with a Natural Shame and Fear: And certainly there is nothing like to an Evil Conscience, to make a Man a Coward, especially when he is in danger of appearing before the just Judge of all the Earth, to whom Vengeance belongeth. It is no marvel, if when



a Man is troubled with the Qualms of a soure Conscience, he is more sick of his Sins, than his Disease: If when he sees Hell open before him, he turn his Face away from that frightful Spectacle, and if he be brought to that miserable pass, that tho' he must not stay any longer in this World, yet he knows not how to venture into another.

These are the necessary and natural Rewards of an Ill Man; tho' in time of Health and Gaity, he may drink down mellowly Thoughts, or roar his Conscience into Silence, or endeavour by lewd Principles to confirm and harden his Mind against Religion, yet when the Hand of God comes and touches him to the Quick, that busie Thing in his Breast will stir and rage, and give him a very bitter Dose and uneasy Pillow.

III. There is another Case yet, which I must mention, because from the Highest to the Lowest, we must every one of us come to it in our order; for it is appointed unto all Men, once to Die, and after Death to go to Judgment. And would we were

so Provident, as notwithstanding the Splendour and Charms of this World, to call our Thoughts home every Day, and to sequester some time for such serious Considerations as these: What is it to Die? Of what infinite Importance is it to die well? What will become of us when we are dead and gone? What Eternity, that great thing Eternity means? How unalterable every one's State will be? And how impossible it must be for us to live over our Lives again, to rectify those Miscarriages we are such Fools to be guilty of now.

Such Religious Meditations would prove very powerful Restraints, to keep Men within the compass of their Duty; according to that of the Son of Sirach; *Think on thy latter end, and thou shalt never do amiss.* What admirable Effects of such Retirements will you not find, when your last Hour shall come? For how slightly soever some have spoken of Mortality, I am confident no Man ever yet repented of it on his Death-bed; nor can any thing be a greater Comfort to a Man at the last, than to  
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consider that the care of his Life has been to keep a *Conscience void of Offence*: 'Tis a Comfort that will stick to him to endless Ages.

Some of the Primitive Writers have mention'd a few Occasional Expressions of our Blessed Saviour, which we do not find recorded in any part of the Sacred History of his Life; how they came by them, is not material for us to enquire: But *Justin Martyr* tells us, this was one of his Sayings,

*Εν οἷς αὐτῶν καταλάβω, ἐν τέτοις καὶ κρινῶ. According as I find you at your Death, so I shall judge you.*

'Tis like that of *Salomon*, *Eccles. 11. 3.* *In the place where the Tree falleth, there it shall be.* If a Man doth diligently endeavour to perform his Duty in that manner, and to that extent which the Laws of Religion do require, his Works will bear him company to Heaven, and Crown him with unspeakable Comfort to all Eternity.

A good Conscience is part of that Banquet upon which we shall feast with *Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*, in the Kingdom of

God ; and so is a guilty Conscience part of those Torments which are the sad Portion of the Damned. For there is no half-way House between Hell and Heaven, for Men to shift themselves from those pollutions wherein they die ; nor does Death so alter the State of a Man as that the sense of Guilt and sting of Conscience doth therefore cease : No, the Powers and Capacities of the Soul are raised and enlarged upon it's Separation from the Body, and Conscience becomes more Quick and Sensible than while it was stifled and immured in a heap of Flesh ; so that instead of being lost or abated, the Torments of Conscience are aggravated and heightened ; and were there no other Fire in Hell, yet that in ones own Breast would yield a Smoke that would ascend for ever and ever. *There the Worm dyeth not*, saith our Saviour ; which may be understood of the Gnawings of Conscience, as well as of the fearful Visitations of an Angry and Just God.

These

These things being duly consider'd what can be so adviseable for us, for the securing of our best and dearest Interest, our Peace in this World and in the next? What can be so necessary for us, as to have a Care of our Consciences, and in Simplicity and Godly Sincerity to have our Conversation in the World? Alas! we have no abiding place here: The Things of this Life will soon slip out of our Hands; that little Good there is in this World we shall lose in a short time; nor can we carry hence any thing with us, but the Remembrance of what we have done. And that the Remembrance thereof may not be painful, I crave the liberty to offer briefly these few things, the Point being altogether Practical.

I. That we give all Moral Diligence to inform our Consciences rightly of the Lawfulness of all we do. This was the fault of St. Paul before his Conversion, that he took things upon trust, and went upon Presumptions. Had he diligently examin'd the Christian Institution,  
and



and consider'd all the Reasons and Arguments on its side; he might have been convinc'd of the Truth of it without a Miracle from Heaven. But he took for granted, that the Mosaical Law in all its parts was to continue for ever; and so he Persecuted the Disciples of Christ as Apostates from the Law; not looking upon all this as injurious Dealing, but as con-dign Punishment. He verily thought himself bound to do those things. And what a chargeable thought was that to the Church of Christ? What an expence of Blood did it put them to? What Imprisonments and other Sufferings did it not cost them, that one Thought of his?

Therefore to have *a Conscience void of Offence*, it is absolutely necessary to use all proper means for the removing and curing of Mistakes; such as unprejudiced Meditation, reading of good Books, conference with skilful and upright Teachers, and the like. For tho' we are all subject to mistakes, by reason of our Nature; and tho' there be few who are not at all mistaken in

in one particular or other ; yet as long as a Mistake is not wilful, proceeding from the Neglect of proper means, the Man is acquitted tho' he be Erroneous. God himself the searcher of Hearts, and the Judge of all the Earth, doth pardon involuntary Ignorances upon a general Repentance. And this should ever be a fixt Rule for our Charity to one another, where our Opinions are different, to bear like Brethren with each others Infirmities, as long as there are tolerable reasons to believe that Mens Hearts are sincere and honest, and their Errors involuntary. However, tho' we live in an uncharitable and censorious World, yet we shall be sure not to miss of Peace and Satisfaction in our own Minds, if we be not wanting to our selves in our endeavours to inform our Judgments rightly. A good Conscience and an Error are not things inconsistent. I am sure our Apostles Errors were in some measure wilful, and yet he obtain'd mercy, because what he had done he did through Ignorance.

2. Our endeavours being thus honestly employed,

employed, the next way to have a *Conscience void of Offence*, is to follow its Dictates. Great is the Power which every one's Conscience hath over him; and those who speak so slightly of its Obligations, either have no Conscience themselves, or else understand not what the Office and Power of it is. It hath by the appointment of God himself, the immediate Government of us; so that the very Word of God doth no otherwise guide us, than by the Light which it affords the Conscience. Tho' the Divine Will be the Supreme Rule, yet Conscience is the inward and immediate Measure of our Actions; and on that account the Command is so peremptory, that every one is to be fully perswaded in his own Mind; and the determination is so positive, that whatsoever is not of Faith, is Sin. Hence it evidently follows that Conscience must be obey'd. For if it be a Sin to Act without some conviction of the Lawfulness of the Action, when I sin it is to Act quite contrary to one's Conviction, against one's Judgment and Perswasion, and in spite of all the Dictates

tates and Out-cries of Conscience, touching the direct unlawfulness of what a Man does? All agree that this is utterly inconsistent with a good Conscience; nay, some learned Casuists tells us, that he is far less a Criminal, who committeth Evil when he thinks it to be Good, than he is who doeth Good when he thinks it to be Evil; for in the former Case the Intention is good, but in the Latter the Heart is obstinate and perfectly Malicious, as well as the Conscience erroneous.

III. To despise the World when it stands in competition with our Duty, is another sure way to keep one's Conscience void of Offence: Because nothing is more apt to corrupt Mens Minds, and to rife them of their Integrity, than the Lust of the Eyes and the Pride of Life; tho' in the Judgment of our Blessed Saviour, it would be the most foolish Exchange, to part with one's Soul, tho' to

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gain the whole World, were an Acquest  
of that nature possible.

IV. And so, to resist the first Temptations unto Sin; to get such a Mastery over our own Wills, as to arm our selves with firm Purposes and Resolutions against it: To pray daily and heartily unto God not to lead us into Temptation: And above all to have God always before our Eyes; to possess our Souls with a true fear of Him; to entertain Reverend and Awful thoughts of his Omniscience and Justice; that he is a Spectator of all our Actions; that He searcheth the very Reins; and that He looks into all the recesses of the Heart; and that a time will infallibly come, when He will Un-case us and lay us open, and reward every one according to his Works, and judge even the secrets of Men by Jesus Christ: This alone would be an excellent Means to make Men keep a Conscience void of Offence



*fence.* For they would not dare to presume in any kind, did but the true Fear of God rule in their Hearts kindly: Because this must be granted by all who have any sense of God, that tho' they may deceive themselves with lying Hopes, and the unthinking Populace with a specious Out-side; yet it is impossible to deceive the God of Heaven: Nor can we suppose any Man to be so careless of his own Safety, and Self-Preservation, as to damn himself, if he doth verily believe that Damnation will be the end of his Evil Works, and that for all those things God will bring him to Judgment.

In short, *Whatsoever things are Honest, whatsoever things are Just, whatsoever things are Pure and Lovely, and of good Report; if there be any Virtue, if there be any Praise, let us think of those things.*

And the very God of Peace sanctifie  
us wholly, thro' our whole Spirit, Soul  
and Body may be preserved blameless mi-  
to the Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ;  
to whom with the Father and the Holy  
Ghost, be all Honour and Glory, now and  
ever. Amen.

**FINIS.**

